

Reluctance, Niceties, and Violence: A Complex Portrait of the Patriots in the Revolutionary War

“They fly to crush the blameless son of Freedom and of me,” wrote Hannah Lawrence, an anti-British poet, during the Revolutionary War. Lawrence was fiercely patriotic and held nothing back in her rebuking of the loyalists.¹ It therefore may come as a surprise to learn that, in seemingly contradictory behavior, she fell in love with, and married, a loyalist soldier. “The world will indeed condemn me for impudence,” she conceded.² Lawrence is just one example of much activity across the political divide that took place in revolutionary New York. Altogether, the blurry lines we can observe when it comes to interpersonal interactions during the war is just one part of the equation as we examine the complexities that were the patriotic side of the conflict.

Joseph Tiedemann analyzes in *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence 1763-1776* why New York was so late to join the patriots in supporting independence. In *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York*, Judith Van Buskirk explains that there were niceties and interpersonal interactions between people from opposite sides of the conflict, demonstrating how friends and family often took precedence over one’s political views and allegiances. In *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790*, we learn from Edward Countryman about the revolution on a grander scale, as it pertains to political systems and societal shifts. Finally, in *The*

¹ Judith Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 69.

² Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 70.

Great New York Fire of 1776: A Lost Story of the American Revolution, Benjamin Carp challenges the moral clarity that is ascribed to the revolutionaries, using the example of a destructive fire which appears to have been started by the patriots.

These four authors work excellently in conjunction with one another to demonstrate the complexities and moral ambiguities that was the patriot side of the war, especially as it pertains to New York. They show that the revolutionaries were no monolith in their attributes or motives, and nor did they always have the moral high ground. Ultimately what comes about from these books is an understanding that the rebel experience in the Revolutionary War was no fairy tale, but rather a story of a compellingly dynamic and nuanced alliance of men and women who are not just in opposition to the monarchy, but in a struggle to balance out their personal lives and their values, their revolutionary instincts and their reluctance to act on them, their moral objective and the means by which this can be achieved.

Joseph Tiedemann begins his book, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence 1763-1776*, with a striking fact: “historians have long been at pains to explain why New York was the last of the thirteen colonies to declare its independence from Great Britain, in 1776.” This is all the more surprising considering that just 10 years earlier there was such rage about the Stamp Act that the violence which ensued convinced local patricians “that anarchy had engulfed New York.”³ But in 1776, things were quite different. The patriots, Tiedemann explains, “were bemoaning the ambivalence with which New Yorkers were defending their rights against British tyranny.”⁴

One such example of this ambivalence was when Washington visited New York at the same time as the British governor of New York, William Tyron, who had returned from overseas.

³ Joseph Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence, 1763-1776* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

⁴ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 3.

Thomas Jones, a loyalist historian, admired how among those who gave the governor a warm and enthusiastic greeting were people “who had been not five hours before pouring out their adulation and flattery” to Washington.⁵

Tiedemann notes the explanations of two different historiographical schools of thought as to why New York was so reluctant to join the revolution. The Progressive School argues that it was not as much about differences in opinion as it was about “class and economic issues.”⁶ One of the historians Tiedemann considers to be under this group of thought happens to be Countryman (who will be discussed in further detail) due to his emphasis on the social and political system’s impact on New York’s decision to join in declaring independence.⁷ Meanwhile, the neo-Conservative school saw that “conflicting interests and ambitions of rival groups within the upper strata of society” is more important to observe.⁸

Tiedemann brings his own theory to the table: “it was British imperialism, not political and economic strains in New York, that pushed the city toward independence.”⁹ And why did it take so long? Tiedemann argues that “the heterogeneity of the city’s population made it very difficult for residents to reach a broad consensus over how to resist British imperialism.” He then finds noteworthy how, despite it taking a longer time, “they painstakingly constructed a consensus” and moved forward to declare their independence and “become a pivotal state in the new nation.”¹⁰

One of the instances Tiedemann brings about to support his argument is when “New Yorkers learned,” in April of 1775, that “British troops had killed Americans at Lexington,

⁵ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 3-4.

⁶ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 5.

⁷ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 261.

⁸ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 5.

⁹ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 7.

¹⁰ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 9.

Massachusetts.” It came as a surprise to the British, he continues, that “Lexington and Concord nudged New York closer to revolution.” They were fed up, and the violence only further served New Yorkers’ “belief that Britain aimed to establish a tyranny” and lent further credence to the patriots’ support for rebellion.¹¹

Tiedemann’s work, delving into how and why New York was more reluctant than the other colonies to demand independence, is a good point of reference demonstrating that on the rebel side of the conflict there were various interests at play and New York’s particular circumstances speak to the complicated nature of the revolutionary cause, especially as it pertains to New York.

Judith Van Buskirk highlights in *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* a particular episode that occurred in 1778. While patriots were “spreading mayhem” in a small British village in Long Island, they “dropped in to see parents, siblings, and cousins.” They were in the middle of a “military operation,” yet they managed to have time to get “caught up on family news” and they “perhaps shared a meal.” These were risky interactions.¹²

Often, Van Buskirk observes, when facing a dilemma between their allegiances, decisions usually resulted in “family connection taking precedence over political conformity.” She notes that, in New York, quite regularly such perceived “hostile opponents” were actually “in constant contact throughout the war, crossing military lines to socialize, lend a helping hand to relatives and friends, or conduct a little business.”¹³

Van Buskirk also directs us to the same scenario as Tiedemann when discussing the pre-war confusion and uneasiness that took place in New York. “Perhaps the most dramatic

¹¹ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 221.

¹² Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 1.

¹³ Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 2.

example of such confusion,” she argues, “was the public demonstrations of June 1775, when New Yorkers greeted Royal Governor Tryon and the Continental army Commander-in-Chief, George Washington, with equal enthusiasm. Some witnesses said that many of the same people attended both demonstrations.”¹⁴ So, this scenario shows the “bipartisan” behavior that may have served as an indicator of both the reluctance of New York to join the revolution and the cross-allegiance activity that would later occur in the midst of conflict.

Another notable story Van Buskirk brings up is patriot General Charles Lee. He was captured by the British, yet somehow he “was discovered simply strolling down one of New York’s streets.” How could this be? Van Buskirk explains that he was “an officer and hence a gentleman,” and was given the restricted liberties higher-ranking officials might expect to have.¹⁵ This is due to what was effectively an honors system during the Revolutionary War. Van Buskirk notes that “even as prisoners, the officers of both armies belonged to an international confraternity of gentlemen, whose members extended certain courtesies even to those they deemed politically misguided or who appeared at the head of an opposing army.” Even though this went against “what we would consider standard military wisdom today,” both the British and the rebels upheld this “code of the gentleman” which “allowed the liberty of the city or, if quartered on Long Island, the liberty of a certain zone.”¹⁶ How Lee was affected by this is merely one example of what was a remarkable phenomenon in revolutionary New York.

Whether it be high-ranking leaders of the opposition seemingly going free or the aforementioned fiercely anti-loyalist poet marrying a British person, Van Buskirk brings forth a picture of two sides who oppose each other officially, and vitriolically, yet still act with empathy on the battlefield and even as much as dine together in their personal lives. Her analysis

¹⁴ Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 13.

¹⁵ Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 6.

¹⁶ Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 73-74.

contributes even more to our understanding surrounding the complexities, and in this case allegiance fluidity more specifically, that took place during the American Revolution in New York.

Edward Countryman observes in *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* that the Revolutionary War is often seen as a relatively smooth process: “not for Americans the years, even decades of disorder; not for them the succession of constitutions and provisional governments, the Bonapartes of the Right and the Left, the terror and counterterror that have plagued others seeking to emerge from revolution.” Rather, things seem to have been in order quickly, with a united front on the part of the rebels in opposition to the monarchy. This is unlike most revolutions, which demonstrates “American uniqueness.” However, Countryman contends, “there is evidence that cannot be explained within such a framework.”¹⁷ “If I may be pardoned,” Countryman states, “this revolution was no tea party.”¹⁸

Countryman’s objective in this book, he explains, is to draw “the connections between the agonized destruction of British colonialism and the equally difficult erection and stabilization of American republicanism in its place.” Essentially, this was not a painless process, but rather an unstable situation involving, as he puts it, “the collapse of existing political relationships and of many existing social ones during the independence crisis,” which came about due to “the old order power wielders” finding “themselves profoundly out of harmony with the needs of the society that they claimed a mandate to govern,” which therefore caused a “society and politics” that were “highly unstable.”¹⁹ Far from an admirably smooth revolution, Countryman asserts.

¹⁷ Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: the American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), xi.

¹⁸ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, xii.

¹⁹ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, xiii.

One support for his argument is that, generally speaking, it would have been difficult for New York to cater to everybody's needs. The province, according to Countryman, had minimal political institutions and officials, yet they were still "expected to cope with the many political demands created by a growing population, increasing social stratification, uncertain provincial boundaries, and, until 1763, endemic war."²⁰

Meanwhile, Countryman notes, after entering office the assemblymen "could be as imperious as any royal placeman." Eventually, as the colonial period came to a close, their "class bias had about it not the slightest subtlety," and "political commentators were vilifying the assembly, rather than the British, as the greatest single threat to New York's well-being."²¹ We see from here that New Yorkers found conflict even amongst themselves, not even mentioning the already existing tension with the British.

On top of all this were "popular uprisings," Countryman explains, which "were part of life in provincial New York." Rioters destroyed buildings and crops, and some of these gatherings involved "thousands of people, wholesale violation of the law, massive destruction of property, wounds and death." As for the eventual allegiance of these rioters, it was what we might call a "bipartisan" problem. Some would be patriots, and some would be royalists. And some, Countryman notes, would not care at all.²² Countryman provides a chronology of incidents to support his assessment, and it is worth noting that Tiedemann disagrees with Countryman's analysis here. He points out that "he did not compare the number of riots in this period with their number in comparable time spans before or after" to help demonstrate the significance of the violence.²³

²⁰ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 73.

²¹ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 73.

²² Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 36.

²³ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 262.

When discussing collaboration in “most of the Hudson Valley townships” between “the supervisor, the town clerk, the roadmasters, the assessors, and the overseers of the poor” and the committeemen, he asserts that “of such obedience, determination to break no law until need forced it, and agreement on local leadership, we have often been told, was the orderly American Revolution made. But in much of New York the revolution was by no means so orderly.” For example, Countryman directs us to revolutionary Eleazer Bartholomew, a militia commander who “instructed the local magistrate to close his court and ‘to grant no process whatever in the King’s name.’”²⁴

Countryman demonstrates that the American Revolution was not a straightforward endeavor, but rather a complex situation of institutions and their disconnect from everyday people. He also highlights the violence that occurred on both sides during this time. One particular example which exemplifies this ambiguity, especially when it comes to the rebel side of the conflict, is the patriots setting New York aflame.

In *The Great New York Fire of 1776: A Lost Story of the American Revolution*, Benjamin Carp argues that “the American cause looks very different if we acknowledge some of its most unsavory features.”²⁵ Like Countryman, Carp is not shy about highlighting the problematic elements of the patriotic side of the conflict. In fact, he wrote a whole book about it. He also opts out of calling King George III’s opponents “patriots,” “whigs,” or “Americans,” instead finding that terms like “rebels” or “revolutionaries” better resemble the pro-independence side of the conflict.²⁶

²⁴ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 146.

²⁵ Benjamin Carp, *The Great New York Fire of 1776: A Lost Story of the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 3.

²⁶ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 6.

When analyzing the Great Fire, Carp explains that he “seeks to resolve the conflicting stories” surrounding the episode.²⁷ It seems, Carp argues, that the rebels were rather prone to starting such a fire. He directs us to a quote from George Washington, who at the time was a general: “Had I been left to the dictates of my own judgment, New York should have been laid in Ashes before I quitted it,” he wrote.²⁸ Carp asserts that the rebels essentially had to make a decision: “either fortify the city or burn it.” In other words, due to the strategic loss the British capture of New York would be, the revolutionaries were faced with an “either we have it or nobody has it” kind of situation.²⁹

The fire turned out to be a great public perception victory for the rebels, because while they may have started the fire, the British responded by executing suspects left and right. Washington made sure to chastise them for this. As Carp explains, “by emphasizing the summary executions in his letters to Continental and state officials, he took a dangerous accusation,” the belief that it was the rebels who started the fire, “and turned it around on the British: they had killed several Americans based on mere suspicion.”³⁰

At first it would seem that the rebels, had they caused the fire, would have lost the moral high ground. Carp notes that, “had the Crown successfully turned public opinion against the Revolution, using the Great Fire as part of its argument, it might have secured more allies.” But the British response, on top of the fact that they were guilty of starting fires themselves, cost them that opportunity. “Once the British lost the war,” Carp continues, “the rebel perception dominated its history — including the story of the Great Fire of 1776.”³¹

²⁷ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 3.

²⁸ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 71-72.

²⁹ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 40.

³⁰ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 172-173.

³¹ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 214.

So, did the revolutionary side of the conflict cause the fire? First of all, to be fair to Washington, Carp does not draw any conclusions about his direct involvement but notes that he “applauded it afterwards.” While it would seem out of character, “he was ready to destroy Boston” at one point “and understood the political risks and strategic benefits of burning New York City.”³²

Carp seems much more confident about the rebels (even if not necessarily Washington) being responsible: “the evidence is sufficient to prove that rebels deliberately set New York City on fire.”³³ This is a bold judgment which goes to further support a more complex understanding of the American Revolution. The rebels had “engaged in targeted destruction,” and ultimately, Carp argues, “the central narrative of the American Revolution could never incorporate a story of Americans burning New York City.”³⁴ In fact, according to Carp’s conclusion there are many things that would seem to need a reexamination, such as the integrity of Benjamin Franklin, who argued to the world that the fire was an accident, or Washington, who seemed at the very least keen on the idea of burning the city. His staff officers “claimed they knew nothing” as well.³⁵

We learn from Carp that there was moral ambiguity on the side of the rebels, who appear to be responsible for the Great New York Fire of 1776. This beautiful city was destroyed, Carp asserts, by the patriots, which he believes does not fit into our common understanding of the Revolutionary War. This serves as yet another example of a dynamic rebel allegiance and their morally questionable actions.

Joseph Tiedemann, Judith Van Buskirk, Edward Countryman, and Benjamin Carp all provide compelling analyses into the complexities of the patriots in the Revolutionary War. From

³² Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 244-245.

³³ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 244.

³⁴ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 247.

³⁵ Carp, *The Great New York Fire*, 247-248.

the moral ambiguity of the rebels, to the “bipartisan” activity and niceties we see on both sides, to the differences in opinions and circumstances amount the rebels resulting in reluctance on the part of some to join the revolution, to the social and political systems that are behind it all, these authors bring a great contribution to our understanding of the war — an understanding that sees a compelling dynamic revolutionary alliance.

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